

**American Eel**  
**Endangered Species Act 90-day Petition Finding**  
**Questions and Answers**  
**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

**1. What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking?**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is initiating a new status review for the American eel as a result of a 90-day finding on the Council for Endangered Species Act Reliability's petition to list the American eel as threatened under the authority of the Endangered Species Act.

The Service published a notice in the Federal Register on Sept. 29, 2011. The notice begins a 60-day information request period, which closes on Nov. 28, 2011. Before making a 12-month finding on whether listing the eel is warranted, the Service must gather and analyze the new information received during this period. In this comprehensive, range-wide status review, the Service must find that the eel warrants listing in order to propose that it receive federal protection.

**2. What is a 90-day finding?**

The Endangered Species Act requires the Service to determine if a petition to list, delist or reclassify a species contains substantial information to support the requested action. Findings are based on information contained in the petition, supporting information submitted with the petition, and other readily available information in the Service's files. A "substantial" finding indicates that the Service will initiate a status review of the species using all information to determine whether the petitioned action is warranted.

**3. Has the Service reviewed the eel for federal protection before?**

The Service received a petition to list the American eel in 2004 and subsequently published a status review of the species in 2007. The review concluded that protecting the eel as an endangered or threatened species was not warranted. The Service found that the species was widely distributed throughout the majority of its range, that recruitment trends for eel in the glass phase were stable, and that the species was not at risk for genetic problems resulting from decline and isolation of subpopulations. It is not listed as endangered or threatened by any of states in the Northeast Region.

The 2010 petition includes some information that became available since the time of the 2007 review. Details on those studies can be found in the 90-day finding.

**4. What makes the American eel important to its ecosystems?**

In all its life stages, the American eel serves as an important prey species for many fish, aquatic mammals, and fish-eating birds. Since the early 17th century, Native Americans have harvested eel for food and cultural sustenance.

American eels continue to support a valuable seasonal commercial, recreational and subsistence fisheries along the Atlantic coast. Fisheries remain economically important by providing both direct and indirect employment. Such employment includes gear manufacturing, food processing and shipping.

## **5. What impacts the species?**

The species' unique life cycle, including its breeding phase in the Sargasso Sea, presents challenges to understanding and assessing biological and environmental processes that influence eels.

The American eel is found in freshwater, estuarine and marine habitats from Greenland to South America. It has been extirpated from portions of its historical freshwater habitat during the last 100 years, mostly as a result of dams built through the 1960s. Habitat loss and degradation, harvest, and turbine mortality have also contributed to some local population declines. New research indicates that changes in ocean conditions may be negatively impacting the eel's reproduction rates (known as glass eel recruitment). Information in the petition on this subject can be found in the 90-day finding.

## **6. Does this finding impact commercial fishing for the American eel?**

American eel harvest is regulated by states and Canada. Restrictions on commercial and recreational fishing rates due to the eel's status as a federally threatened or endangered species would only be considered if a federal listing becomes warranted in the future.

## **7. What is being done to conserve American eel?**

Several actions have been taken to conserve eel populations, including installation of eel ladders for upstream passage at hydropower projects, implementation of state harvest restrictions, and dam removals that open historical eel habitat. Canadian resource agencies have closed the harvest of eels in the Canadian portion of Lake Ontario. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada has designated the American eel a "species of special concern."

## **8. What type of information is the Service seeking?**

The Service uses the best available commercial and scientific data as the foundation for all endangered and threatened species classification decisions. The Service is particularly seeking the following types of information not known at the time of the 2007 status review: species' population structure (panmixia); rangewide analysis of impacts from the parasitic nematode *Anguillicola crassus*; statistically significant long-term glass eel recruitment declines; and the correlation of climate change and glass eel recruitment.

## **9. Where can I learn more?**

More information about the American eel, including photos, a fact sheet and the 90-day finding, can be found at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/newsroom/eels.html>.